Shirtless Feminists: The Enemy?

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The *Boston Globe*'s Ellen Goodman is a columnist full of surprises. In August, Goodman passed out her annual misogyny awards—"to those who have done their utmost in the past twelve months to slow the progress of women"—and this year—surprise!—one of Goodman's dubious achievement awards was presented to New York's Rochester Seven.

The Rochester Seven? Half of the women who read this letter will probably raise their eyebrows as they ask: "Who in blazes are the Rochester Seven?" And, indeed, if you rely on the mass media for most of your news about the women's movement, you've probably never heard of the Rochester Seven. The people who decide what's "news"—and what isn't—usually ignore cultural radicals like the Seven because, in the midst of the Big Chill era, the word from the top is that "radicals don't exist." Nowadays,

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women are all dressed for success and pursuing fashionable careers, right?

For readers who need an introduction: the Rochester Seven are a group of feminists who marched topless in Rochester, New York, several months ago to protest a state law that allows men but not women to take off their shirts in public places. The New York law is so strict that it outlaws the breastfeeding of infants in public places. Needless to say, the New York law does not prohibit the sale of *Penthouse* and *Hustler* and other magazines that feature bare-breasted cuties. Nor does the law prohibit topless entertainment in Times Square porno joints. The New York law says "no" to the backpacker who wants to go skinny-dipping in the Adirondacks while saying "yes" to the porn merchant. (If the law had banned the sale of *Penthouse*, we assume that Ellen Goodman and her colleagues at the *Globe* would have screamed "Censorship!" in all directions. Corporate interests first, people second, right, Ellen?)

I'm not concerned about Ellen Goodman's lack of support for the Rochester Seven. That's not the issue. What's annoying is that at a time when American women are taking serious abuse from corporate and political leaders, a *Globe* columnist singled out the Rochester Seven as being among those "who have done their utmost . . : to slow the progress of women." By focusing public attention on the Rochester Seven, Goodman has helped to take attention away from some of the major difficulties that women face in the 1980s. By suggesting that the Rochester Seven are somehow "a problem," Goodman has further served the interests of the misogynists by suggesting that feminist radicals are "half-baked" and misguided women who lack serious grievances. Twenty years ago any woman who spoke out in protest was branded as radical and misguided. And there are still power figures in the nation who would be delighted to push all of us back into silence. Ellen Goodman may not support the goals and tactics of the Rochester Seven—that's her right. But I would hope that, at the least, she would have the good sense not to label the Seven as major obstacles in the path of feminist progress.

I'm not worried about the influence of the Rochester Seven, the feminist goddess worshippers, the lesbian separatists, or any of the other cultural radicals who are frequently scorned and whipped in the mainstream of the women's movement. I'm increasingly worried, however, about the influence of prominent women who go out of their way to publicly attack the radicals. Whose interests are being served when feminists attack feminists in the pages of the *Boston Globe*?

To Ellen Goodman go two awards of recognition for her recent attack on the Rochester Seven. First, we offer her the Golden Croissant, an award given to once-promising writers who have drifted into trivial pursuits and don't-rock-the-boat journalism. The Golden Croissant may be claimed at the nearest Dunkin' Donuts shop. (Nominations for next year's awards are now being accepted; any suggestions?) Second, to Ellen Goodman also goes the Plastic Chador Award, a fashionable fuddy-duddy item made from a Union Carbide trash bag. If you don't want to wear it, Ellen, you can use it to hold your criticism of feminist radicals. When the radicals get roasted, all women feel the heat.

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